

SEXUAL POLITICS IN *THE WASTE LAND*: ELIOT'S TREATMENT OF WOMEN AND THEIR BODIES IN «A GAME OF CHESS» AND «THE FIRE SERMON»

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1. INTRODUCTION

Feminists, like Hélène Cixous, would argue that it is not only inappropriate but it is impossible for men to write women's experience.

«Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies»¹.

«Women must write woman. And man, man»².

It is problematic, then, from Cixous's view to interpret the experience of woman in man's writing. However, is it possible for trauma to act as an intermediary between woman and man and reconcile the differences? Truly, women have experienced the trauma of being driven away from not only their bodies but from writing their stories. A traumatized man may have more in common with the plight of women than Cixous has considered. Although not female, T. S. Eliot perhaps had some knowledge of trauma and could realistically represent the rape of women in his work. What is more important than Eliot's traumatic experiences is an understanding of how rape, the epitome of sexual trauma, is figured in Eliot's work. Why is it important to discuss and analyze the use of rape in literature? If it is true that *The Waste Land* (1922) served to «shape the perception of Central Europe for a whole generation of British and American writers»³ and continues to influence latter generations,

1. CIXOUS, Hélène: «The laugh of the medusa», in David Richter (comp.): *The critical tradition: classic texts and contemporary trends*, 2nd ed., Boston, Bedford, 1998, trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, p. 1454.

2. Ibid., p. 1455.

3. SMITH, Stan: «Unreal cities and numinous maps: T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden as observers of central Europe», in Waldemar Zacharasiewicz (comp.): *Images of Central Europe in travelogues and fiction by North American writers*, Tübingen, Stauffenburg-Verl., 1995, p. 167.

then it is not only necessary but crucial to understand how Eliot treats rape and how it functions in his poetry.

2. ELIOT'S IDENTIFICATION WITH WOMEN

While the modernists claim the advantage of universality in their themes, the edwardians are left with the disparaging reputation of depending «too heavily on the world outside the book»⁴. Eliot, however, depends heavily on the post-WWI world for the tone and poetics of *The Waste Land*. The poem addresses the social ills and unhappiness Eliot perceived in both his personal life and the outside world. *The Waste Land* is very much a poem rooted in the conditions of its time. According to Stan Smith in «Unreal Cities and Numinous Maps: T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden as Observers of Central Europe,»: «The origins of *The Waste Land* are intimately bound up with Eliot's reflections on the state of Central Europe»⁵.

He makes the case that: «Eliot's knowledge of [postwar] Central Europe's economic and social collapse was both intimate and professional»⁶ because, by this time, he was living in Europe and working for Lloyds Bank and so had first hand knowledge of the social and economic conditions. One of Eliot's economic insights consists of the realization that London is functioning on «a sexual economy where there is more *money chasing* more *bodies*»⁷.

With an economy that is still gendered as a result of a sexual division of labor in the early twentieth century, it is little wonder that those with money (primarily men) desire that which cannot be bought against the owner's will-bodies, particularly women's bodies. In «A Game of Chess,» while Lil's husband is away in the service of the army, she remains at home and is expected to make herself «a bit smart» in appearance because «he'll want to know what you done with that money he gave you To get yourself some teeth»⁸. If Lil decides not to accommodate, then Albert may very well leave her, predicts Lil's friend. Thus, we have at least one example of money chasing a body in the text. The change of Eliot's citizenship and the subsequent acculturation allowed him a unique perspective into «how images of otherness are constructed out of the desire to belong as well as to renounce»⁹. As a result, Eliot could relate to the marginalized position of women and may very well have identified with women in *The Waste Land*, as he appears to do with Marie early in the poem:

4. KAPLAN, Carola M. and SIMPSON, Anne B.: «Edwardians and modernists: literary evaluation and the problem of history», in Carola M. Kaplan and Ann B. Simpson (comp.): *Revising edwardian and modernist literature*, New York, St. Martin's, 1996, p. xi.

5. SMITH, Stan: Op. cit., p. 167.

6. Ibid., p. 170.

7. LEVENSON, Michael: «Does *The Waste Land* have a politics?», *Modernsim/Modernity*, 6.3 (1999), p. 8. Italics are mine.

8. ELIOT, T. S.: *The Waste Land* in *The complete poems and plays of T. S. Eliot*, New York, Harcourt, 1991, pp. 37-55, lines 142-144.

9. SMITH, Stan: Op. cit., p. 167.

«He said, Marie,
Marie, hold on tight. And down we went.
In the mountains there you feel free»¹⁰.

Because Eliot associates the city with sex, it is noteworthy that it is in the mountains and away from the city that Marie feels liberated. Identification with women probably also stems not only from Eliot's knowledge of economics, his foreign background, but from his position as a writer. The number of high culture writers working within the Modernist movement was relatively small. According to Andreas Huyssen,

«That such masculine identification with women, such imaginary femininity in the male writer, is itself historically determined is clear enough. [T]he phenomenon has a lot to do with the increasingly marginal position of literature and the arts in a society in which masculinity is identified with action, enterprise, and progress—with the realms of business, industry, science, and law»¹¹.

Eliot's sense of his own marginality enables him to represent at least one woman's experience, that of his former wife, Vivien. In fact, Vivien «found *The Waste Land*'s publication to be painful, since the poem was so tied to her»¹². As for the connection between trauma, femininity, and Eliot, Vivien wrote: «As to Tom's mind, I am his mind»¹³.

3. THE FEMINIST POETICS OF «A GAME OF CHESS»

«A Game of Chess» works itself out, line by line, to be a study in the depiction of rape and trauma. Like Middleton's *Women Beware Women* in which a seduction is paralleled to a game of chess, the careful unfolding of line after line in this section mirrors the strategic moves of a chess game in order to depict a rape and its aftermath. Subsequently, the woman appears traumatized in the following lines:

«My nerves are bad to-night. Yes, bad. Stay with me.
Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak.
What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?
'I never know what you are thinking. Think.'»¹⁴

The insistent questioning and imperative commands by the woman belie the unsettling anxiety attributed to the female speaker in the poem. In this case, then, «speak to me» could easily be a metonymy for «speak for me.» On a broader scale, the repetitions of «bad,» «speak,» and «think» constitute the formula for salvation in the waste land: acknowledge that things are «bad,» «speak» out, and re-«think» that which enables «bad» to happen so as to

10. ELIOT, T. S.: Op. cit., lines 15-17.

11. HUYSEN, Andreas: *After the great divide: modernism, mass culture, postmodernism*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1986, p. 45.

12. KOESTENBAUM, Wayne: «*The Waste Land*: T. S. Eliot's and Ezra Pound's collaboration on hysteria», *Twentieth Century Literature*, 34.2 (1988), p. 113.

13. Ibid., p. 113.

activate an awareness of the need for change. In «What the Thunder Said,» Eliot advocates for a new belief system when he draws from the Brihadaranyaka-Upanishad. He offers datta, dyadhvam, and damyata as a better alternative to the current belief systems illustrated in the poem. Surely the ideas of giving, mercy, and self-control—or, as Eliot roughly translates: give, sympathize, and control as a better alternative to the current belief systems, such as capitalism, illustrated in the poem. Salvation, symbolized as the coming of rain, is the end result when the new belief system is in place at the end of the poem.

4. THE FEMINIST POETICS OF «THE FIRE SERMON»

The allusion to Philomela is picked up again in «The Fire Sermon.» It is necessary to read the myth as an important intertext to *The Waste Land*. Asserts Levenson,

«The barbarous king who rudely forced Philomela is the terrible figure for the politics of intimacy, power between bodies, whose effects are written throughout the poem»¹⁵.

We should keep these sexual politics in mind when reading *The Waste Land*, even if Philomela is not overtly present in the text. In the ancient myth, Philomela's tongue was cut out in order to leave her with no opportunity to speak out and effect change. «The Fire Sermon» contains significant parallels to «A Game of Chess.» The following lines foreshadow what is to happen to the typist in much the same language as used earlier in the poem:

«Twit twit twit
Jug jug jug jug jug jug
So rudely forc'd.»¹⁶

The ideology of patriarchal capitalism is critiqued because it has dirtied the ears to which the woman cries; «jug jug» is unintelligible and means nothing to anyone. The section progresses from here to show how rape is connected with economics. In line 216, Eliot refers to workers as «the human engine,» which begs acknowledgement of Marx. According to Marx,

«Owing to the extensive use of machinery and to division of labour, the work of the proletarians has lost all individual character, and, consequently, all charm for the workman. He becomes an appendage of the machine [...]»¹⁷.

The human engine is the collective description of the appendages of the machine, the workers. In «The Fire Sermon», the typist is never given a name. She has no individual character because she is simply known by her occupation, which emphasizes her relationship with her machine, the typewriter. Her work

14. ELIOT, T. S.: Op. cit., lines 111-114.

15. LEVENSON, Michael: Op. cit., p. 5.

16. ELIOT, T. S.: Op. cit., lines 201-204.

17. MARX, Karl and ENGELS, Friedrich: *The communist manifesto*, New York, Penguin, 1985. Trans. Samuel Moore, p. 87. Original publication date is 1888.

is not charming; by the end of the day she is «bored and tired»¹⁸. The typist is the perfect proletariat counterpart for the bourgeois woman in «A Game of Chess». The gaze is present in this scene as well, and this time the gazer is specifically defined:

«I Tiresias, old man with wrinkled dugs
Perceived the scene, and foretold the rest-»¹⁹

Tiresias catalogues the activities of the typist and notes the clothes piled on her bed. He chronicles the rape in lines 237-242. After the rape, the typist, much like the bourgeois woman, concerns herself with her appearance. She too «looks a moment in the glass» and «smoothes her hair with automatic hand»²⁰. This preoccupation with appearance recalls the bourgeois woman sitting at her dressing table and brushing her hair. Such a comparison strengthens the commodification of both women. Both are elaborately gazed upon, while the typist is also set up as a cog in the capitalistic machine. The parallels between the treatment of the two women serve to reinforce the similarity of their situations.

4. RAPE: A DISEASE OF PATRIARCHAL CAPITALISM

It is not too difficult to see how rape functions as a disease of capitalism. The woman's body becomes a commodity with the potential for enforced reproduction of more commodity. Capitalism produces commodity fetishization, and this fetishization enables the rapist to feel validated when he gets what he wants, even if he has to forcefully take it. In «T. S. Eliot and the Rape of God,» Sharon Stockton equates the body of the raped woman as the receptacle of the horror of capitalism:

«The violated woman, like the soul cleansed in purgatory and then taken back into the bosom of God, becomes a vessel for the expression of transcendent meaning-as force and as horror. Hers is a face wiped clean of illusions about democracy, individuality, and material accumulation; [...] It is her body which becomes a 'receptacle' for the engendering of value-which becomes, in fact, through the transubstantive spectacle of willing submission to hierarchy and power, a new kind of specie: she is the (now empty and purified) money form whose value can be imposed from outside and above, the product that has accumulated value at the cost of human repression[...].»²¹.

Indeed, Eliot's woman, impaled on the burnished throne of capitalism, engenders her value by further commodifying herself as revealed through her fixation on the appearance of her hair. She participates in her own subjugation to some extent because she willingly submits to hierarchical power. She does

18. ELIOT, T.S.: Op. cit., line 236.

19. Ibid., lines 228-229.

20. Ibid., lines 249 and 255.

21. STOCKTON, Sharon: «T. S. Eliot and the rape of God», *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 39.4 (1997), p. 380.

nothing to break out of the cycle and seems to want to elicit the gaze. The clerk, although he finds the typist unwilling:

«endeavours to engage her in caresses
Which still are unproved»²²

and since his «exploring hands encounter no defence»²³, he «makes a welcome of indifference»²⁴. Because of the willingness to submit to hierarchical power, value is imposed upon the violated woman at the cost of her liberation²⁵.

5. ADVOCACY OF A DIFFERENT BELIEF SYSTEM

The vehicle for redemption is through the institution of a new belief system that will transform society, as «What the Thunder Said» purports. Although Eliot does not overtly specify that the treatment of women is his measuring stick of the success of a given society's organization, Marx does²⁶. «Peuchet on Suicide,» translated and emended by Karl Marx in 1846, contains an explicit argument that the existing society causes suicide and that a total reorganization of society is needed, beginning with the abolition of all social classes, alienated labor, and the type of family that functions as an instrument of oppression. What is unusual is that Marx, like Eliot, deals with bourgeois women, a class that usually is passed over in discussions of the oppressed. Ignoring the most vulnerable group for suicide in his time, unmarried men²⁷, Marx translates four of Peuchet's six vignettes, and three of these concern bourgeois French women who commit suicide as a result of familial oppression (e.g., domestic violence, authoritarian parents, enslavement of the wife). These vignettes are used to show that society as a whole, not just the proletariat, suffer from the social condition of society, as the images in *The Waste Land* suggest.

Michael Levenson takes a similar view of Eliot's depiction of society in «Does *The Waste Land* Have a Politics?» According to Levenson,

«Even as some modernists fought and died [. . .] those who stayed home in London had found an urban culture small and pliable enough to yield to literary activism. Surely it's telling that the great moment of crisis in Eliot's work coincides with the recovery of peace»²⁸.

22. ELIOT, T. S.: Op. cit., lines 237-238.

23. Ibid., line 240.

24. Ibid., line 242.

25. STOCKTON, Sharon: Op. cit., p. 380.

26. Kevin Anderson argues that «Marx seems to give a greater emphasis to gender than even to class relations as a measure of human development.» See *Marx on Suicide*, p. 6. MARX, Karl: «Peuchet on suicide», in Eric A. Plaut and Kevin Anderson (comp.): *Marx on suicide*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1999, pp. 45-75. Trans. Eric. A. Plaut, Gabrielle Edgcomb and Kevin Anderson.

27. See statistics in Marx's «Peuchet on Suicide», p. 70.

28. LEVENSON, Michael: Op. cit., p. 3.

Levenson argues that *The Waste Land* should be viewed as a critique of postwar London society and not the London society of the war years because conditions were significantly different during and after the war. Most significantly, Levenson is the only critic to argue in a somewhat similar vein as this paper:

«What the poem both dreads and desires is the annihilation of the city as apparatus, what Eliot calls 'the postwar machinery of life' with its 'horrible waste,' the city as the relentless wheel»²⁹.

Significantly, in the last stanza of the poem, Eliot writes,

«London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down»³⁰.

This line would symbolize the annihilation that Levenson sees the poem preoccupied with, while

«A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many
I had not thought death had undone so many»³¹

indicates the horrible waste generated by the relentless wheel of capitalism. Although Levenson hesitates to position Eliot on either the right or left side of the politics fence, *The Waste Land* and «A Game of Chess» and «The Fire Sermon» in particular are sympathetic to the trauma experienced by women in the relentless wheel of capitalism and patriarchy, quite possibly because Eliot himself identified with women and their marginality because of the forces of modernity, as well as the traumatic incidences in his personal life.

Michael Tratner has an interesting take on the politics of *The Waste Land* in *Modernism and Mass Politics: Joyce, Woolf, Eliot, Yeats*. He attempts to articulate what the representations of women mean, especially when discussing «A Game of Chess.» He argues that Eliot employs a «radical political aesthetic in order to reverse bourgeois decay and reestablish any culture at all»³².

However radical he thinks Eliot might be in his political aesthetic, he paints Eliot out to be extremely conservative and «rereads» Eliot in the traditional way. For instance, according to Tratner:

«[I]n Eliot's works, the rapes are the cause of women's gaining voice, not the result. He was not so much seeking the liberation of women's voices as the return of males who did not use women (and workers) but took care of them and expressed women's concerns for women. Eliot was also identifying with the women and seeking to find a male leader figure who could take care of him and express his concerns better than he could»³³.

29. Ibid., p. 4.

30. ELIOT, T. S.: Op. cit., line 427.

31. Ibid., lines 62-63.

32. TRATNER, Michael: *Modernism and mass politics: Joyce, Woolf, Eliot, Yeats*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1995, p. 166.

33. Ibid., p. 172.

The problem with this argument is that it is not radically political as Tratner maintains³⁴. Also, what woman is given voice as the cause of rape? The allusion to Philomela is found in sections II and III with an emphasis on the inarticulate «jug jug.» This speech, Eliot suggests, is the result of rape and not the cause. Thus, women are not empowered by rape, in contrast to what Tratner argues. Instead of reading any sort of trauma into the opening scene of «A Game of Chess,» Tratner declares that the woman is depicted as «too excited and exciting, too wet, taking control and engulfing the male [...] in her synthetic perfumes»³⁵. If she is captured by the gaze, the gaze of the engulfed male, then she is controlled and not in power to control. The male's impression that the woman is in control because she entices him does not detract from the fact that he constructs her through his gaze. His act of bestowing power on her is only possible because he has the power to construct or reconstruct what he sees.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Eliot, much like Marx, harbors antagonistic feeling towards the bourgeoisie, although it should be remembered that both depict the unhappy situations of bourgeois women in their works with sympathy. In his 1923 *Dial* review of Marianne Moore's poetry, Eliot expresses his contempt for bourgeois art. For Eliot, the vitality of art in the modern era resides in the proletariat art, such as the art found in the music hall. Aristocratic art or high art is «the refinement, not the antithesis, of popular art»³⁶.

Thus, for Eliot, high art is only the integration and refinement of proletariat art. High art needs the vitality of proletariat art or it will cease to be popular and disappear. According to David Chinitz,

«Eliot faults [...] an 'artificial and unimportant distinction' between 'proletariat' and 'aristocratic' art. This distinction, Eliot warns, has 'dangerous consequences'—again, presumably that a dissociation between popular culture and high culture will impoverish the first and kill off the second»³⁷.

34. According to Tratner, *The Waste Land* «points particularly to capitalism as the source of mistreatment of women and of the masses», p. 173. It would seem from this observation that Tratner would want to show in what ways women are depicted as victimized in order to support his assertion, but this is not the case, as can be seen above. Tratner attempts to link Eliot to Marx in several instances, but what he overlooks is that Marx never suggested that women be left in the hands of those who could oppress and control (which the act of rape signifies). Furthermore, if Eliot is interested in taking «care of [women]» and expressing «women's concerns for women,» then why, if women are subjected to abuse by men in power, should women be represented and taken care of by those very same men? On a positive note, what Tratner's argument wants to reinforce is the oppression that women and the masses experience as a result of capitalism and Eliot's subsequent identification with women.

35. *Ibid.*, pp. 170-171.

36. Eliot is quoted in CHINITZ, David: «T. S. Eliot and the cultural divide», *PMLA*, 110.2 (1995), p. 238.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 238.

Eliot blames the bourgeois class for creating a divide between aristocratic art and proletariat art, and dismisses bourgeois art as nothing but «sham ideas, sham emotions, and even sham sensations».³⁸ Bourgeois art creates the divide because it wishes to disassociate itself from the proletariat in order to obtain the status of aristocratic art. Eliot understands the abolishment of bourgeois art as a necessity in order to pave the way for a popular art that promotes cultural unity through its associations with high art.

It appears that both Eliot and Marx considered the plight of bourgeois women as indicative and perhaps par exemplar of a faulty organization of society. Surely if one can compare the similarities in the treatment of women in writing between Eliot and the forefather of communism, Karl Marx, one cannot disagree that Eliot is closer to the edwardians in calling for social reform in socially minded literature than traditionally acknowledged. Some critics, like Marianne DeKoven, interpret «A Game of Chess» as rabidly anti-feminist. DeKoven dismisses «A Game of Chess» as «terminally degraded modern femininity» because of its «vicious representations of women»,³⁹ which is not a fair assessment. It is true that the women are degraded and assaulted in *The Waste Land*, but these depictions are not a result of overt misogyny. Instead, this paper strives to offer a better understanding of how Eliot construed the plights of the bourgeois woman in «A Game of Chess» and the typist in «The Fire Sermon» than what is traditionally understood in order to liberate *The Waste Land* from its reputation as anti-feminist. How can it be anti-feminist when Eliot, like Marx, can be read as an advocate for change in the material conditions of women? *The Waste Land* illustrates the need for social reform and even offers an alternative means of obtaining it.

38. Ibid., p. 239.

39. DEKOVEN, Marianne: *Rich and strange: gender, history, modernism*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1991, p. 192.